DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 328 920 CS 212 799

AUTHOR Anderson, Edward
TITLE Literary and Rhetorical Influences of the Black American Folk Tradition.
PUB DATE 90
NOTE 24p.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Black Culture; *Black Dialects; *Black Education; Black History; Black Literature; Black Students; Black Studies; Community Colleges; *Folk Culture; *Rhetoric; Two Year Colleges

ABSTRACT

Instruction in rhetoric, English composition, and literature can be enhanced if black language and the stylistic influences of the black folk tradition are recognized and presented in the classroom. Teachers need to be aware of the history and heritage of the Black-American dialect and the black folk tradition. In addition, teachers and students need to be aware of the vocabulary of black language, its historical development, and its contributions to mainstream English. Also of importance is the style of black language, which developed from a combination of sacred and secular traditions. This style can be seen in the "persuasive techniques" used in black literature, including punning or playing on words, extemporaneous or spontaneous expressions, indirection or innuendo, metaphorical images, boasting or bragging. Typical narrative devices include toasting, call and response, signifying and sounding. The literary and rhetorical types of the Black-American folk oral tradition can add a great deal to the classrooms in that they represent a direct expression of the Black-American experience from the colonial period to the present. Thirteen references and a list describing the forms and literary types in the Afro-American Folk Tradition are appended. (GFW)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED328920

LITERARY AND RHETORICAL INFLUENCES OF THE BLACK AMERICAN FOLK TRADITION

by Edward Anderson

John Tyler Community College
Chester, Virginia

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☒ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

E. Anderson

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

CS212799

LITERARY AND RHETORICAL INFLUENCES OF THE BLACK AMERICAN FOLK TRADITION

Rhetoric, composition, or literature instruction in America would be incomplete without the use of a knowledge of the elements that go to make up the African-American folk oral tradition of literature and the black American rhetorical and verbal strategies. Instructors and students who are trying to do literary criticism of African-American literature as well as some mainstream American literature must have a knowledge of these black American folk language and stylistic elements.

Although it is worth mentioning the importance of some outstanding black folk tradition writers of black American literature--Paul Laurence Dunbar, Charles Chesnutt, James Baldwin, Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes, Sterling Brown, Ralph Ellison, Margaret Walker, James Weldon Johnson, Haki Madhubuti (Don Lee), Nikki Giovanni, and Imamu Baraka (LeRoi Jones), Alice Walker, and Ernest Gaines, it is worth taking note of Houston Baker's assertion that "to mention other black writers who have employed aspects of the black folklore tradition would be to mention almost every writer in the black American literary tradition." (Baker 20)

Instruction and teaching of rhetoric, English composition as well as literature could be more effective and would be enhanced if black language and stylistic influences of the black folk tradition of black literature were recognized and presented in the classroom.

The black language and stylistic influences of the black folk tradition of black American literature are used widely as communicative aspects of America's advertisements, commercials, political rallies, entertainment world (dramatic, comical, musical, etc.), religious world, psycho-cultural world and in some cases in our educational setting. However, teachers and students need to know the nature of the effective use of the African-American language and the style that has been and still is used in the black oral folk tradition of African-American literature. The influences of the black American folk tradition language and style have greatly influenced the linguistic usage by blacks as well as by whites who often take on many black language communication usages in cross-cultural communication processes. Hence, the black American folk language and literary rhetorical forms have great relevance for our educational environment and is presented here to make students and teachers more aware of its influences upon the effectiveness of black American literature and rhetoric.

The black <u>language</u> part of the black folk tradition makes reference to the <u>words</u> used in the tradition, and the black <u>stylistic</u> part of the tradition makes reference to <u>how the words are used</u> in the black folk tradition. This information should be known by teachers in order that they can instruct all their students in producing oral and written compositions, in improving students' reading skills, and in analyzing and interpreting black American literature and much mainstream literature.

Elements of the black American dialect have been and are still used extensively in the black folk tradition and are even being carried over into the compositions of our students since they use many of these expressions legitimately almost daily. One should take note of the language of black folk tales, black spirituals, and black American verbal and rhetorical strategies. Language and stylistic elements go to make up the unique black dialect used in the black folk tradition of black American literature. This black American dialect has a heritage and a legitimate place in the black folk tradition, and many of the expressions should be recognized for their value in students' persuasive language productions.

Historically, when black people were first brought from the West Coast of Africa to American soil, they shared common cultural patterns which were rich in tradition and folklore. Their lack of a common language which came about since they spoke many different dialects as well as their fate as slaves did not keep them form expressing their emotions, sensations, rhythms, and imagination. These black Americans used and are still using language and stylistic elements that were rooted in their African rhetorical circles with many African derived language and rhetorical styles and a European based word system. They further revealed their African literary heritage through a native gift to produce folk literature such as poetry, rhythmical songs, wise sayings, and through oral folk stories with a use of vivid imagery, figurative and metaphorical language, double-edged vocabulary and sentence structure. The unique folk tradition of black American literature

includes those literary types that are basically oral, such as black folk tales, black folk-songs (i.e., spirituals, blues, ballads), black sermons, black jokes, and black verbal and rhetorical strategies, such as rapping, shucking, jiving, running it down, signification or signifying and sounding. This tradition of black American literature and rhetoric has been and is still used by black Americans mainly for survival reasons.

Almost all racial and ethnic groups have produced anonymous music and literature. These folk musical and literary forms are usually produced spontaneously and handed down orally from one generation to the next. Hence, in the transitional state, the literature or music may gain or lose parts of its content or substance. These anonymous productions may vary from place to place. Many versions of a particular incident (or oral story or literary form) may arise about the same time in various neighboring localities and clans. Lack of written literary form results in different versions of a particular incident, story, or literary form. Black American folk literature had its origins in this same process and sprang basically from African and black American folklore, legends, customs, and traditions. When such folk materials were recorded, they were then preserved thus preventing change.

The many aspects of the cultural heritage of black Africans imported to America and the Black American English dialect are outstanding features in the oral production of the variety of folk literary forms. As oral poets and story tellers, oral folk

literature which they produced is also highlighted by their keen ability to use irony, imagination, and rhythm (musical rhythms of the blues, jazz, and the spirituals). Many pieces of black American literature that have folk characteristics have known or acknowledged authors and other pieces are anonymous. Hence, many black American writers either consciously or unconsciously used elements of their folk oral cultural heritage in their works.

Aside from this background material, the instructors and the students first need to know that there is the black vocabulary or black language part of the black folk tradition of black American literature which came about mainly from a West African background. Black vocabulary of the black folk tradition often is called slang as it is used in the mainstream sense, but it is a part of the black man's ethnical language and cultural historical background. An examination or look at such works as Clarence Major's Dictionary of Afro-American Slang, the Dictionary of Americanisms, Lorenzo D. Turner's Africanisms in the Galluh Dialect, the Dictionary of American English and J.L. Dillard's Lexicon of Black English still will reveal a wealth of black American vocabulary words previously and presently in mainstream use throughout America. Some black vocabulary words came directly from African origin; others from inflated word vocabulary origins, and still others from African loan-translated words. Such words as "elephant," "gumbo," "banjo," "goober," "banana," "sorcery," "juke," as in juke-box, "tater," "cola," as in coca-cola, "oasis," and "turnip" came directly from African origin.

The black American folk oral tradition has produced the following black African loan-translated words such as "skin" (give me some skin), "dig," "okay," and "mean," (taken just the opposite of the mainstream English usage). The black American music world has contributed much to the lexicography of black English usage. From this black form of culture one gets such words as "gig," "cooking," "cool," "changes" (going through changes), "hip," and "jazz." From the black church and religious world we have borrowed such words as "shout," "soul," "Sister," "Brother," "well," and "all right." Blacks have always used appropriate English for their own purposes and for survival reasons. Beginning with the colonial period of American Negro slavery and on down to today, African-Americans adopted some European forms, but revised them into totally unique expressions. Hence, black American's songs, poetry, folk tales, literary, verbal and rhetorical forms have doubled, hidden and some not so hidden meanings. Black Americans in early history and on down to today have devised a system of vocabulary communicative usage that could not and <u>still in many cases</u> can not be deciphered by the mainstream culture. This fact must be recognized by mainstream instructors and taken into account as these instructors seek to evaluate the work produced especially by black students.

Black vocabulary words get into usage by the American mainstream dominant culture and, hence, they (these black words) enrich the general vocabulary of all Americans. Examples of this process may be seen as the mainstream culture takes on many of the

black derived words previously mentioned and use such black American vocabulary words as "cool," "hip," "jive," "jazz," "uptight," and "rap," Yet, black American vocabulary is in a constant state of change. Often when blacks desire to continue their use of the "coded" vocabulary and language with figurative usage and rhetorical power, they change the original usage they (blacks) had originally assigned the word. Such a case is the change of "hip" to the new black use of the meaning of the word "together." Black vocabulary is definitely full of images and metaphors, often with two levels of meanings, one Black and one White.

Black Americans also used and are still using a word referral linguistic process gotten from West Africa (in Wolof, Mandingo, Ibo, Yorubo dialects). For example, in Black English "bad" means "good, or excellent" and it means "unpleasant" in Standard English or mainstream American language.

The black <u>style</u> and the black <u>language</u> of the black American folk tradition of black American literature come from the <u>sacred</u> and the <u>secular</u> combination. It is evident from the African heritage that the <u>spoken</u> or <u>oral word</u> has the greatest value as may be seen in the black oral tradition of this black literature and has been used in America for survival reasons. Thus, the greatest performance of black language can be seen in the black sermon; in telling jokes, narrations or folk tales or myths; in folk sayings and proverbs; in "rapping" in the barbershop, beauty shop, street corner, and signifying and sounding in general. The street corner

black rapper (giving an outstanding flashy, exaggerative, dramatic and spectacular speech) can be found in Richard Wright's novel Black Boy who used it for survival reasons.

Although the secular style is used on the street and the sacred style is used in the church, there is no distinct separation between them. The sacred style of African-American folk tradition materials is usually Southern and rural (e.g. (black spirituals, blues, folktales, toasts, playing the dozens, and black work songs. These two forms overlap when the preacher often uses similar type secular "raps." This fact is evidenced by readings by black culture poets such as Haki Madhubuti (Don Lee) or Imamu Baraka (LeRoi Jones) before a black audience. In black music the two types overlap--black blues singers and black religious song singers, artists and performers move from one world to the other. It must be noted that this black American folk tradition language and style were and are used by Rap Brown, Malcolm X, Martin L. King,Jr., Jessie Jackson, Benjamin Hooks and Andrew Young. Their speeches and writings show evidence of the movement from the sacred to the secular combination with influences of black language style of the black folk tradition of black American literature.

The black American language and the black American style that make up the sacred and the secular folk tradition of black literature can be seen in many elements or qualities of expression of the "persuasive techniques" of the black folk tradition of the black literature. The value of the recognition of this fact by the writer and reader and especially by the instructor can go far in

adding the dynamic utilization of this important material for classroom edification.

The first of these persuasive techniques of the black folk tradition of black literature is punning or playing on words and is often used especially by blacks in playing the dozens (black verbal game in which mainly someone's mother or other relatives are put down in a sexual context), in sermons, in political type rallies, and in street corner "raps". The next persuasive technique is the spontaneity of black folk expression. It is freedom to improvise with extemporaneous or off-handedness by taking advantage of anything that comes into the language situation.

Third, blacks use a persuasive technique known as indirection in which the communication maker uses innuendo or suggestion through a round-about twist of language usage by making a point in a strange manner. Malcolm X in many speeches often sent a hidden message to his enemies and also put them down. Fourth, image-making is another quality of this persuasive black language and style. It is an important criteria of black speech in which there is a use of metaphorical images and other kinds of imagistic language. Martin L. King, Jr. used many of these forms of metaphorical language in this "Letter from Birmingham." Many black ministers use metaphors and images in their sermons. Most black American spirituals used images and metaphors to portray dual pictures and figures of the Other-Worldliness and the Here-and Now-World of slavery and black American conditions since the days of slavery.

The boasting or bragging technique is the fifth persuasive device used by the black "rapper" or user of black language and the black style. In boasting he shows his characters who often do the impossible. "Stag-O-Lee" which is taken from black blues and is often heard in the Toast form (long epic-like poem) was one of the greatest black boasters in referring to physical "badness" and "coolness" and one who can do the impossible. He was so "bad" that flies would not fly around him or fly around his head in the summertime and even white people were said to be afraid of him. (See Julius Lester's Black Folk Tales, a book which gives an updated version of this and many other old black folk tales in prose form). The use of exaggerated language which magnifies beyond the limits of truth is also a black persuasive device which is used when the black talkers and black writers use speech with uncommon words and rarely used expressions. Finally, blacks' use of persuasive tonal semantics expresses verbal power which can be achieved through the use of words or phrases carefully chosen for sound effects. What is important is for the black talker or writer to make words sound good although the words may or may not make sense. Muhammad Ali (Cassius Clay) often uses words in his black tradition with his taunting rhythm that predicted his opponents' defeats. These above stated (language and stylistic) strategies have great validity and persuasive effects. They have power in the production of a rich black folk tradition of black American literature that has rhetorical power.

Other ways and methods in which black Americans express themselves persuasively by using the black folk tradition of black American literature are through the African derived use of call and response (African derived), sequence of narrations, signifying or sounding, and the use of tones or sounds to get at meaning. In each of these forms there is the combination of the black secular (non-religious) and the sacred (religious) forms of expression and the dualism to achieve harmony and balance which is African derived.

In storytelling or the narrative one sees the black Americans use the story-telling that is so evident among Africans and black Americans. It consists of forms of slave and plantation type folk tales (Brer Rabbit, John Cycle stories, hant tales, ghost tales, witchcraft tales, human interest stories, conjuration tales, stories giving the origins of man, preacher tales, etc.) in which incidents and events are presented in a black American rhetorical form used to explain a point, to persuade believers of opposing views, to win friends, to influence people, or simply to entertain. For example, Charles Chesnutt, an early black American writer, presented the black folk narrative form in his "The Goophered Grapevine" and many other of his tales in his <u>The Conjure Woman</u>. In "The Goophered Grapevine" there is a character, Uncle Julius, an ex-slave, who tries through a conjuration witty story to fool a white Northern couple into not buying a vineyard which has made him prosperous. Many of the black tales pinpoint the underlining small animals (or black persons) who are supposedly weak and who outsmart

the large sized animals or enemies, usually the white representatives (See Brer Rabbit cycle of black American folk tales). In black American folk tales today there is a black yarn spinner in many neighborhoods and communities just like the ancient African counterpart from which it is derived. Some present-day stories are tall tales, stories about God and Biblical figures, historical heroes and events in real life. Some black blues and black ballads (secular) and black spirituals and black sermons (sacred) present these narrative techniques. The present day type of trickster tales are the black Toasts which present the poet and the hero in a fearless state and tell the tale in epic form which shouts a "toast" to the bad (or terrible or good or excellent) character in pinpointing the hero. Some of these Toasts are "Signifying Monkey," "Stag-O-Lee," "Shine," "Sinking of the Titanic" and "Dolemite" (See Gates, The Signifying Monkey). Noted black poetess Nikki Giovanni in her "Ego Tripping" presents an outstanding Toast, thus elevating the Toasts above the barbershop, pool halls, street corner, and prison, where they are most often heard.

Julius Lester re-set the poetic "Stag-O-Lee" toast in his book Black Folk Tales, and it has the flavor of a legitimate form of black folk tradition prose. These forms of narration include characterization, plot, details, often related digressions, and outstanding verbosity which is effectively used to tell the story. Often figurative language, images, or symbols are used in this type of narration. These forms of narrative language style devices are also used today by present day black American professional

"rappers." Hence, the black American folk narratives show the strength, power, endurance, coping and trickery abilities of the black Americans who can skillfully handle "words" orally and in writing.

Second, in the call and response black communication system there is a spontaneous and non-verbal interaction between the speaker's or writer's statements or "calls" which are emphasized or punctuated by the listener's or reader's answers or "responses." This form of expression is found in black spirituals, black blues, black work songs, black sermons (the preacher is responded to by the congregation), new black poetry and poetry reading sessions, in speeches and political rallies and similar type gatherings, and in literature by known African-American authors. Many black students' classroom works contain this communication process for emphasis in their oral and written compositions. The call and response device is evident in the black work songs, "Many Thousands Gone" and "Foller de Drinkin' Gou'd." Richard Wright used this technique in the funeral sermons in his novel The Long Dream. In his novel The Invisible Man Ralph Ellison used the call and response process in its secular context. He used this form to tell the story of the Haitian general Toussaint L'Ouverture who led a successful slave revolt in 1791.

Fourth, Signifying and the mildly termed Sounding are persuasive black verbal and rhetorical strategies that may effectively be used in the communication classroom (See Henry L. Gates' Signifying Monkey). They refer to insulting someone, and

they involve boasts, implying, begging, or inciting someone through the use of gestures in verbal play. Signifying especially refers to talking with great innuendo, to carping, to needling, to lieing, and to cajoling. It means the ability to talk around the subject while never quite coming to the point. It also means making fun of a person or a situation. Signifying is characterized by indirection, metaphorical-imagistic, humorous and ironical techniques and uses playing on words, rhythmic fluency and sound. It can be a one-liner or a series of loosely related statements or a long connected story. "Goodnight/ Sleep tight/ Don't let the bedbugs bite" is an example of a black folk rhyme song using the form of Signifying. Signifying can be found also in Lawd Today by Richard Wright. Also akin to signifying are shucking and jiving which are also used by black writers, talkers and speakers and are persuasive rhetorical and verbal strategies. (See Kochman's sources)

Third, there is the use of tones and sounds to indicate meanings which is another device of the black folk tradition of black literature and may also be found in black literature, speeches, and other oral communication. It consists of a use of vocal tonal inflections and voice rhythms to portray meanings in the communication system. The voice is used like a musical instrument with rhythms and word sounds. This form shows the use of the songified pattern and the musical quality. It was used by such people as Malcolm X (oral and written speeches), Jesse Jackson (oral and written speeches), Martin L. King, Jr. (oral and written speeches) and Bill Cosby, Eddie Murphy, Arsenio Hall,

Whoppi Goldberg, and Richard Pryor. Sound is of utmost importance to the meanings in the black stylistic expressions. The interaction between what is said and how it is said affects the listener or the reader. Hence, tone serves as a way of getting at meaning in black English and may be seen in repetition, use of stress and pitch in pronunciation, alliteration, play on words, rhyme, talking while singing, and intonation. Talking while singing may be seen in contemporary black poetry in an incorporation of musical lyrics and lines to be sung within the structure of a poem. Imamu Baraka's (LeRoi Jones) poem "The Nation Is Like Ourselves" is an example here. Haki Madhubuti's (Don Lee) poem "Don't Cry, Scream" is an example of how a poem is to be read and sung at the same time. Madhubuti's repetition of "change" throughout his poem "Poem to Complement to Compliment Other Poems" shows how the poet seeks to get the blacks to change their reality and perception and gain a new state on consciousness. Use of stress and pitch in principal words in the black stylistic ways shows black intonation in black folk literature. Rhyme also remains important although the free verse (used by Giovanni and Madhubuti) is used in the black folk tradition and is more akin to prose writing.

Instructors may draw upon the black American devices and techniques shown here for their discussion of African-American literary works and black rhetorical and verbal strategies (i.e. signifying, shucking and jiving etc.) and for application in their composition and rhetorical classes (especially call and response, signifying and the use of getting at meanings through effective use

of sound and tones) in urging students to write persuasively. These techniques and literary forms may help students to more effectively interpret African-American literary works. Being aware of and gaining information in rhetorical and literary classes can prevent students from receiving a distorted picture of the real American world.

The literary and rhetorical types of the black American folk oral tradition can add a great deal to our classroom in terms of the historical, literary, and rhetorical perspectives they bring. The black oral tradition shows direct expression of the black American experience from the colonial period to the present; hence, it shows many universal aspects of the human condition, giving historical perspective of what it means to be "black" in America. Not only does the tradition express black American reality, but it also shows a definite mastery of literary and rhetorical forms, and it contains the appeal of literature and rhetoric. The black American folk oral tradition, in its varied forms, can be effective tools in the classroom for motivation, instructional, and cultural purposes.

To conclude, the black American oral tradition of literature and verbal rhetorical strategies express the African-American reality. These forms contain many literary and rhetorical techniques and linguistic expressions that make them effective tools for motivating and instructing students in literature and composition and rhetorical classes.

WORKS CITED

Abrahams, Roger D. Deep Down in the Jungle. Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1970.

_____. Talking Black. Rowley, Mass.: Newbury House Publishers, Inc., 1976.

Baraka, Imamu. Blues People. New York: William Morrow, 1963.

Baugh, John. Black Street Speech. Austin: The University of Texas Press, 1983.

Bell, Bernard W. The Folk Roots of Contemporary Afro-American Poetry. Detroit, Michigan: Broadside Press, 1974.

Bizzell, Patrick and Bruce Herzberg. The Rhetorical Tradition--Readings from Classical Times to the Present. Boston: Bedford Books of St. Martins's Press, 1990.

"Black Language and Culture: Implications for Education." Special Issue of the Florida FL Reporter. Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1968.

Brewer, J. Mason. American Negro Folklore. Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1968.

Brown, Claude. "The Language of Soul." In Aspects of American English, edited by Elizabeth M. Kerr and Ralph M. Aderman. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1971.

Brown, Hubert Rap. "Die Nigger Die!" New York: Dial Press, 1969.

Chesnutt, Charles. The Conjure Woman. Ann Arbor, Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 1969.

Cottrell, John. Muhammad Ali: The Man of Destiny, Formerly Cassius Clay. New York.

Courlander, Harold. Negro Folk Music, U.S.A. New York: Columbia University Press, 1963.

Dance, Daryl C. Shuckin' and Jivin': Folklore from Contemporary Black Americans. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978.

Davis, Authur P., and Redding, Saunders, eds. Cavalcade. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1971.

Dillard, J. L. Black English. New York: Random House, 1972.

_____. Lexicon of Black English. New York: The Seabury Press, 1977.

Dorson, Richard M. American Negro Folktales. Greenwich, Conn.: Fawcett Publications, Inc., 1967.

DuBois, W. E. B. The Souls of Black Folk. New York: Avon Books, 1903.

Dundes, Alan, ed. Mother Wit From the Laughing Barrel. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1973.

Ellison, Ralph. Invisible Man. New York: Random House, 1952.

Gates, Henry L. Jr. The Signifying Monkey--A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988.

_____. Figures in Black. New York: Oxford University Press, 1987.

Golden, James L. and Rieke, Richard. The Rhetoric of Black Americans. Columbus: Charles E. Merrill, 1971.

Hughes, Langston and Bontemps, Arna, eds. The Book of Negro Folklore. New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1958.

Hurston, Zora Neale. Mules and Men. Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1935.

Kochman, Thomas. "Culture and Communication: Implications for Black English in the Classroom." Florida FL Reporter (Spring-Summer 1969.)

_____. Rappin' and Stylin' Out: Communication in Urban Black America. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1972.

Lester, Julius. Black Folktales. New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1969.

Levine, Lawrence W. Black Culture and Black Consciousness. New York. Oxford University Press, 1977.

Madhubuti, Haki (Don Lee). Don't Cry, Scream. Detroit: Broadside Press, 1969.

Major, Clarence. Dictionary of Afro-American Slang. New York: International Publishers, 1970.

Malcolm X. Malcolm X Speaks. New York: Grove Press, 1965.

Turner, Lorenzo D. Africanisms in the Gullah Dialect. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949,.

Wright, Richard. Black Boy. New York: Harper & Row, 1966.

_____. Lawd Today New York. Walker and Company, 1963.

LIST OF AND DESCRIPTIONS OF FORMS AND LITERARY TYPES OF WORKS IN THE

AFRO-AMERICAN FOLK TRADITION

I. Black Folktales

Stories or narration that sprang from a basically oral tradition
Used irony, boasting, symbolism, hyperbole with unique treatment of story-telling and narrative element
Folktales are animals and bird stories, Old Marster and John stories, Colored man and white man stories, hoodoos and two-heads stories, spirits and haunts stories, witches and mermaids stories, the Lord and devil stories, wonders stories, horrors stories, protest stories, scare stories, fool stories, lying tales, preachers and Irishman stories.

II. Black (Negro) Folk Songs

A. Spirituals

Themes--deep religious conviction, note of protest, expresses life of Jesus and other outstanding Biblical figures in accepted religious and lyrical form
Revealed slaves' thoughts in plantation life
Gave blacks faith in their religion, desire for freedom from sin, desire to fly to freedom.
Conveyed feeling of oppression (from sense of sin) and elation (from sense of spiritual salvation)---oppression of sinners universal, not racial, as it applies to all "sinners", hence all human beings
Compared slaves' condition to that of Israelites with Pharaoh representing the master-class and Canaan becoming a land of freedom (either Canada or the North)
Had and possibly seen with two meanings for slaves as part of code language--a wordly one (flight, escape, freedom) and a spiritual one which was usually only seen by the master

Most are anonymous and passed on by word of mouth with a lead singer occasionally varying his stanzas
In code-like vocabulary and ironical tone
Used symbol, image, figurative language, black dialect, rhythm, dual and double meanings

B. Folk Blues

Mainly anonymous black folk poetry and black secular songs
Dealt with grief, self-pity, hard times, black luck, unrequited love and despair
Sung mainly by a single singer
Are mocking, sarcastic, tragic-comic, tragic, dramatic, curious with theme of the will to endure, to relate to singer and listener alike with the shared suffering of race or poverty, or of lost love--to repeat the suffering of hope of making the distress more tolerable through the knowledge that it is understood and experienced by all
Slow, melanchology song with jazz rhythm usually in a major key but with the 3rd and 7th tones (blue notes) flattened optionally

C. Slave Secular Songs

Took the form of nursery rhymes, plays, dance and love-making songs
Had rich form and irony, wit, humor, wisdom
Very often songs of ironic protest
Were poetic songs and songs often of ironic protest

D. Folk Work Songs

Sung with the work cadence (rope-pulling, hammer swinging) which implied that the work will never cease and that the worker will never free himself from the work
Had effect of never-ending intrusion of the labor itself with repetition of onomatopoeia sounds of the work

E. Folk Black Ballad

Narrative poem that sprang up from life of black people and is passed from one general to another orally
Versions may vary in certain locations
Usually about black heroes who performed unusual acts and were presented as epic figures
Were and still are transmitted and changed by word of mouth as they record tragedies in the lives of black people
Had a poetic style in a story form

F. Some Other Songs

Chantey and other miscellaneous songs

G. Afro-American Jokes

Terse, short but black witty tales which depend upon a punch line conclusion for comical or humorous effect
Black dialect is the mode of expression

H. Proverbs

I. Superstitions

J. Black American Folk Sermons

Rich in Biblical images, poetic language (metaphor and simile), emotional appeal, skillful narrative development, use of idiomatic expression within the language of the Bible
Blend commonplace experience with historical action
Characterized by allusions, symbolism, rhythmical pattern and black dialect

K. Names

List of names and labelings attached exclusively to black people

L. Riddles

M. Rhymes

N. Children's Rhymes and Pastimes

O. Folk Tradition in Black American Literature

Almost all black American writers have used some forms and materials from the black folk tradition
Outstanding writers who have used the black folk tradition are Paul Laurence Dunbar, Charles Chesnutt, Langston Hughes, James Baldwin, Don L. Lee, Margaret Walker, Ernest Gaines, Claude McKay, Jean Toomer, Zora Neale Hurston

P. Contemporary Folk Forms

Flip Wilson, Godfrey Cambridge, Dick Gregory, Jackie "Moms" Mabley, and Bill Cosby have used monologue comedy in their performance with outstanding use of black folk tradition
Bill Cosby's "Weird Herold" and "Fat Albert" sketches are examples as well as Flip Wilson's "Rev" tales (preacher tales descendent)

Edward Anderson
John Tyler Community College
Chester, VA